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by

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Reflecting Pools

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Reflecting Pools

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Report

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Abstract

Reflecting Pools

Daniel David Payavis, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Jack Stoney

This report sketches a series of considerations that operate within my art practice. They are intended to elaborate on and open up, rather than simplify, the processes by which I arrive at art works. The ideas discussed roughly fit into, or are products of, three efforts which run parallel and independent of one another: my studio practice and production of art works; the study of artistic practice in a general sense, not always dependent on *my* particular art practice; and the study of a broad range of image types. The serial arrangement of the sections is meant to convey the non-hierarchical relationships of the ideas. Selected art works I have produced are explicated as they relate to the ideas; some art works appear in more than one section.

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Machine Images

The relationship between technology and image production is extensive, constantly changing, and therefore frequently unclear. I see the technological aspect of images as a crucial consideration, especially in art production; every image is made with some kind of technology, whether it is a painting, a photograph, a sand drawing or a satellite image, and the way it is made is part of its meaning. Recent imaging technology has, however, created special conditions for image production. Paul Virilio has claimed that, "[w]e are leaving the image behind – including the conceptual image by Warhol for Duchamp – for optics, and an optics that is *corrected*," (*The Accident of Art*, 70).[1] He has criticized Frank Gehry for developing a building using a popular architectural program, and challenged architects everywhere to develop their own software in order to surmount the restrictions of commercial programs (73-4). His notion of *optical correctness*, built on an analogy to political correctness, suggests a kind of idolatry: we now mistake computers for our aesthetic arbiters, allowing them to determine the parameters of what we think of as an image. Virilio speaks with the apocalyptic regret of his conservative Catholic demographic (and I read him accordingly), yet there is something pertinent in his desire to understand how aesthetics become standardized and controlled. I find it compellingly accurate that computer graphic design, among other sources, has led people to confirm machine aesthetics as not just legitimate or acceptable, but *correct*.

[1] Virilio uses the term *optics* to refer to vision disassociated from image content. This isolation of vision's *mode* is the result of the 'machine vision' provided to cruise missiles and other weapons, and to surveillance mechanisms, among other technologies.

Werner Herzog expresses the situation as the inability to find *any* image at all that embodies our culture: in Wim Wenders's film *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), Herzog describes the extreme lengths (traveling to Mars or Saturn, for example) he would go to in order to find images that are "pure and clear and transparent" – as I understand it, images that are free of mechanical standardization. Wenders and Herzog are atop an observation tower looking over downtown Tokyo when Herzog says, "The simple fact is there are few images left. From here you can see everything's been built up. There are few images to be found. One has to dig for them like an archeologist. One has to search through this ravaged landscape."[2] These statements help clarify my own impulses to deal with machine images while also critiquing and defying their influence. For Herzog, the massive swell of late Capitalist culture provides no answers: the incessant agglomeration of images has negated itself. It would seem that for him too, one must look away from machine images for any kind of hope.

When Virilio declares a transition from image to optics, he enters a discussion of machine aesthetics – instances of image production where the production technology controls the choices made, or rather forces certain choices to be made. Whether the technology is Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator, 3D special effects software, CAD programs, surveillance imaging, or satellite or missile vision, a calibration of images occurs somewhere within the technologies' respective systems, a refinement of images that eventually leads its users to define the category of images they produce *through* the

[2] Quotations are taken from subtitles; Herzog speaks in German in the film.

technology used to produce them. The means by which machine images are made is also what qualifies them.

The issue of machine aesthetics came into play for me when I began making images with a digital scanner. I first used the scanner to print collages as consolidated images, but then started manipulating imagery on the scanner bed while it was being scanned, resulting in a kind of 'scanner drawing.' These could be produced very quickly, and I soon had a large archive of scans of all kinds. Different gestures and techniques of manipulating images on the scanner bed led to an increasingly large vocabulary of image types. Some of the effects of this method are well-known and easily identifiable: color separation, resembling misregistration in screenprinting, occurs whenever an image is slid at certain angles from the scanner beam; some manipulated scanned images will remain readable, but will transform in wavy patterns that follow the same motions across the image perpendicular to the scan vector. Other gestures – scanning an image and then scanning the resulting image; creating an illusion of dimensionality through a back-and-forth motion of an image on the scanner; manipulating multiple images on the scanner bed at the same time; and altering scanned images as a kind of post-production – read much more ambiguously, and it was these examples that led to more sophisticated and complex images (figures 1 and 2).

This vocabulary of gestures, it soon occurred to me, was the result of working with the restrictions of the device; the scanner inevitably delimited a zone within which I could work. In response to Virilio's admonishment, I scrutinized the scanning process, attempting to comprehend the degree to which I was allowing the device to guide my

choices. While the more complex images I've made seem less bound by the technology, I am still uncertain of how I feel about working with them. I made paintings from some of the scanned images as a way to separate the qualities produced by the scanner from the encoded form of the digital image (figures 3 and 4). This was done, among other reasons, to test for the limits of these images as they are translated into another medium.

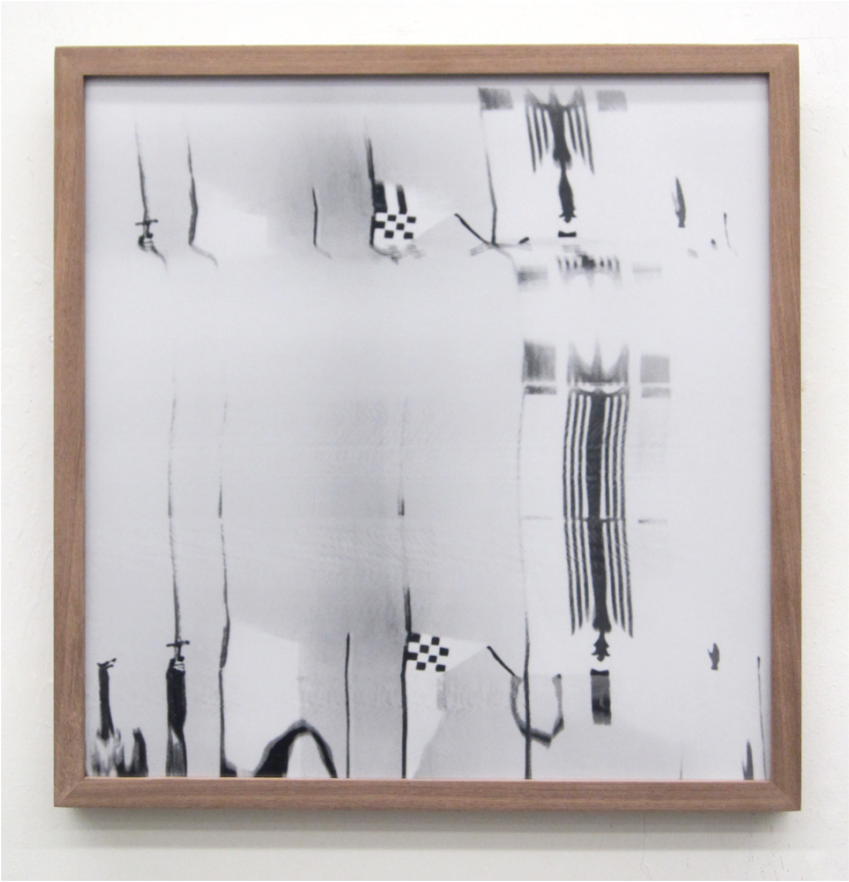

figure 1: *Flags*, 2010

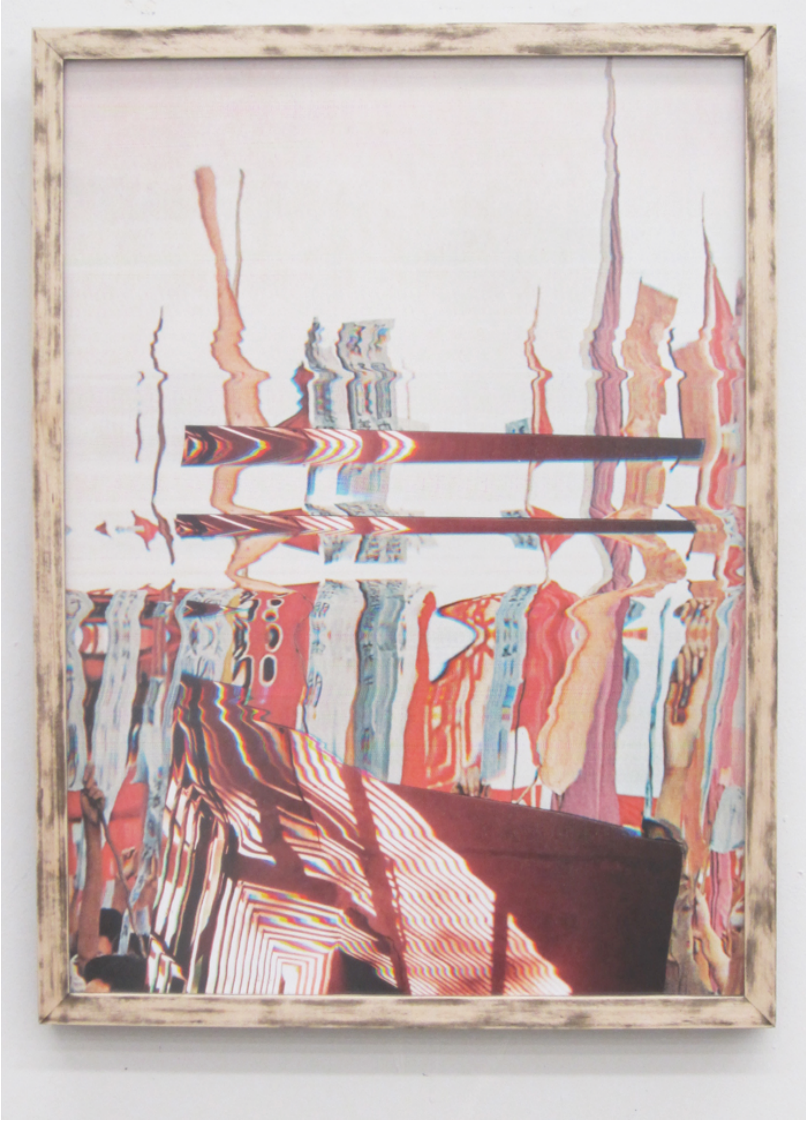

figure 2: *Flags and Cage*, 2010

Reflections/Flags

The manipulated scans evoke some particular types of images that have been at the forefront of my thoughts for a long time: reflections and flags. Two of the paintings I made from scanned images, both titled *Familiar Pool* (figures 3 and 4), draw comparisons with pools of water, and with reflections. The paintings are composed of text that has been manipulated on the scanner, rendering it warped and wavy. The text is painted carefully so that it is as close to a printed image as I can make it; this is to contrast with a ground of dispersed oily paint upon which it sits. The random dispersion of the ground and the warping of the text-image present two different aspects of liquidity, and as a single image perhaps suggest a reflection. Roland Barthes effectively suggests the infinite complexity of the reflection's meaning in *Empire of Signs*:

> In the West, the mirror is an essentially narcissistic object: man conceives a mirror only in order to look at himself in it; but in the Orient, apparently, the mirror is empty; it is the symbol of the very emptiness of symbols ('The mind of the perfect man,' says one Tao master, 'is like a mirror. It grasps nothing but repulses nothing. It receives, but does not retain.'): the mirror intercepts only other mirrors, and this infinite reflection is emptiness itself (which, as we know, is form) (78-9).

The consistent warping along the vector of the scanner also suggests a flag in the wind. A defining feature of the flag as an image is its physicality; while images on flags often attain pure abstraction and symbolism, they are constantly subject to physical manipulation by the air. Some of my images, such as *Flags*, *Flags and Cage*, and *Incendiary Flag* (figures 1, 2 and 5), are made from images of flags that have been warped on the scanner, thus duplicating the vexilloid reference within a single image.

These two things, reflections and flags, are vital for me when conceived as images, because they are specific forms that highlight, in different ways, the profound ambiguity at the heart of all images. Reflections might be seen as proto-images, images produced by the world of itself, or as the phenomenon that allowed man to first engage in representation. Flags blur the boundaries of image and object, being both a physical image and a flattened object. As images, they both operate metonymically: reflections show something that is *in relation* to them – next to, in front of, above, or below them; flags, even if designed through symbolism, come to designate something else (a king; a country) by virtue of its *using* the flag to represent itself. The conveyance of meaning in my work occurs metonymically rather than metaphorically; most of my work aligns itself with either of these image types – the manipulated scans being illustrative of both.

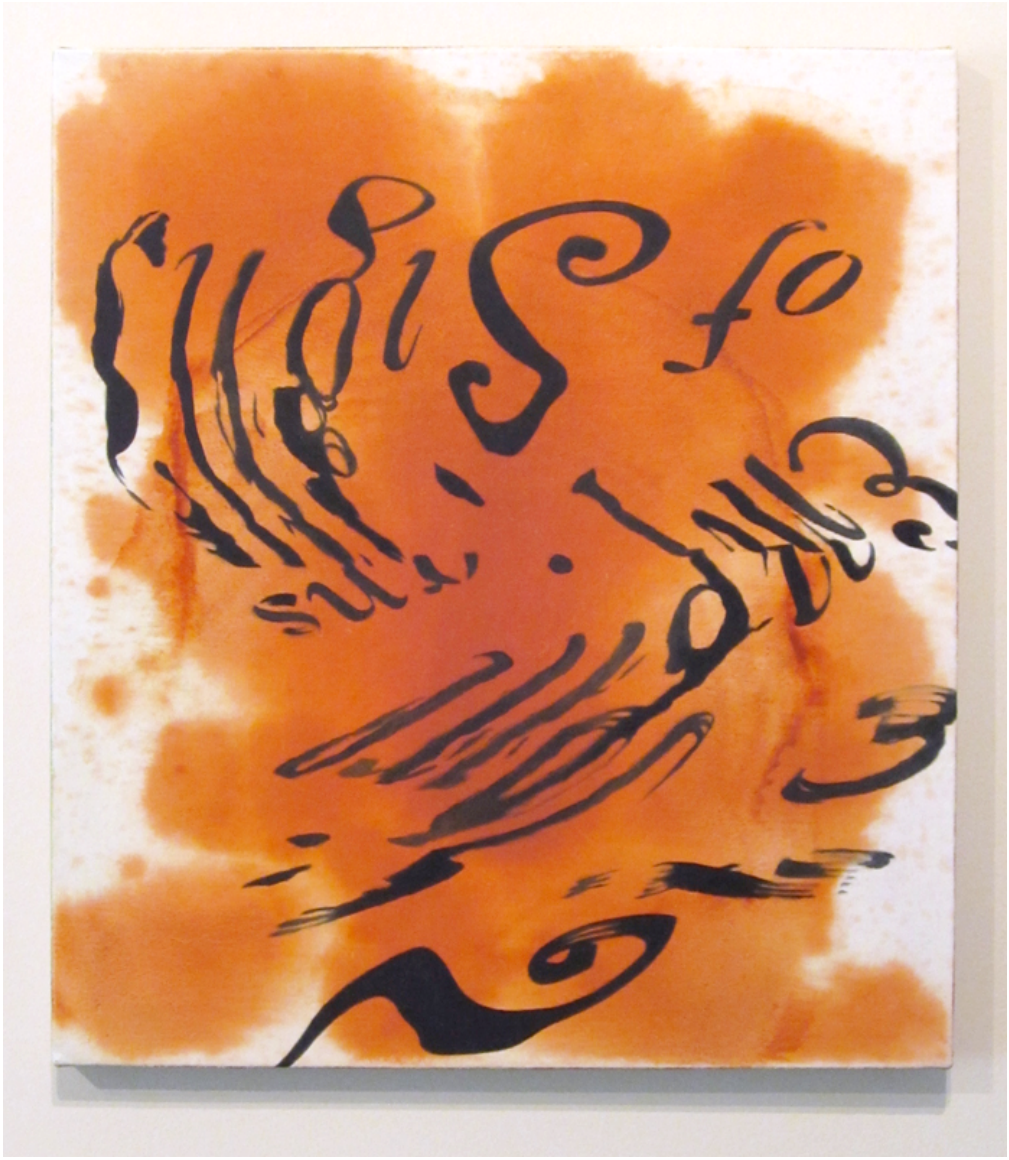

figure 3: *Familiar Pool (Plaisir)*, 2011

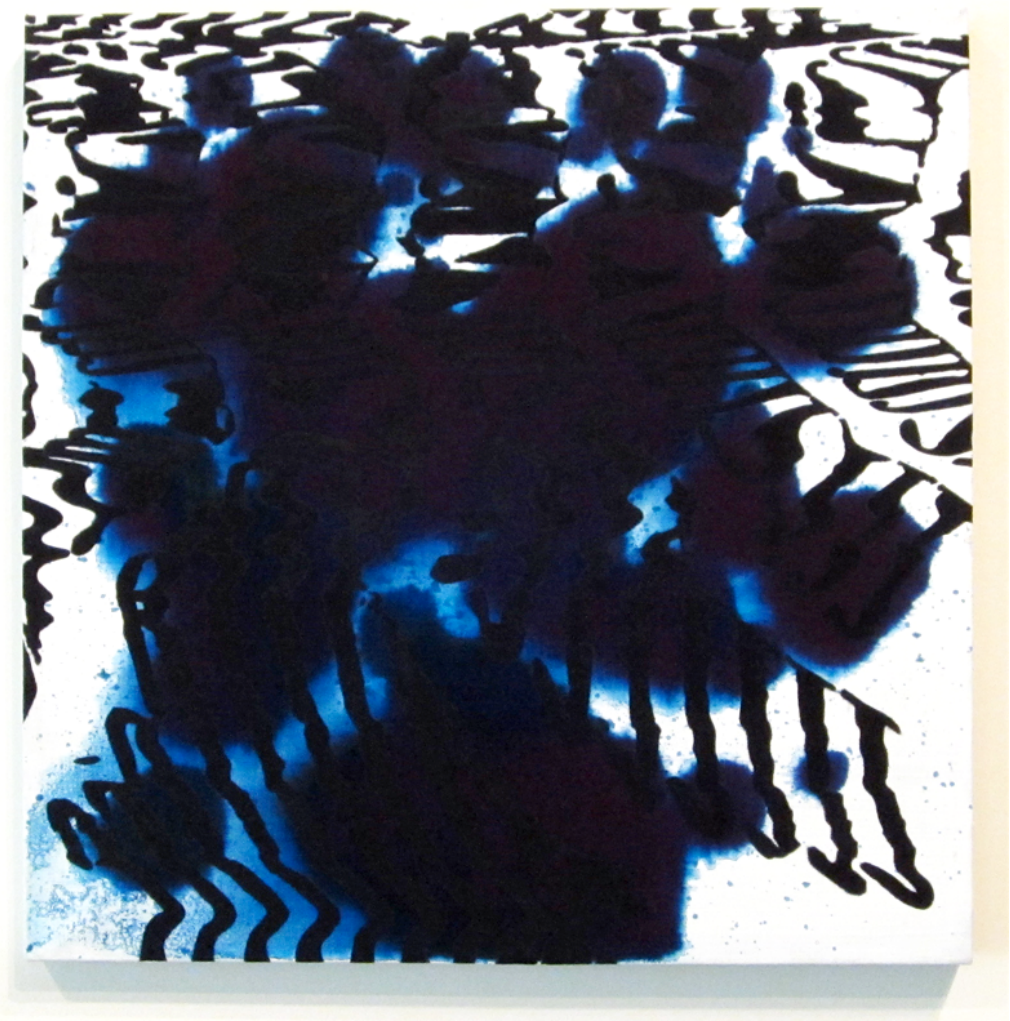

figure 4: *Familiar Pool (JJJJJ)*, 2011

figure 5: *Incendiary Flag*, 2011

Lightness/Stupidity

In a lecture in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino offers lightness as a potent value in literature (and life, by extension), one that he claims has been a goal in most of his writing. Lightness, for Calvino, distinguishes itself fundamentally from irrelevance, absurdity and banality, all qualities one might associate with it; it is a value readily aligned with the alacrity and flexibility of a great intelligence.[3] From conjuring the myth of Perseus and Medusa (recalling the hero's cloud-hopping sandals and the flying horse that sprouts from Medusa's blood) to describing a witch astride her broomstick in the night sky, Calvino paints lightness as a quality replete with meanings, and one that often transfers itself onto the reader. Of his own endeavors, Calvino says, "I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language" (3). The notion of lightness suggests buoyancy and spiritedness, as well as the physical loss of weight.

Isa Genzken, echoing Calvino[4], writes that, "[a]rt and architecture should avoid all Fascistoid tendencies. They should go along merrily and cheerfully, light-heartedly and intelligently" (*Isa Genzken*, 141). As I happened to come across these testimonies to lightness, I was simultaneously discovering that a sense of lightness, light-heartedness, and even comedy was permeating a lot of good work in the art world. This was one of my

[3] "…I hope to have shown that there is such a thing as a lightness of thoughtfulness, just as we all know that there is a lightness of frivolity." (Italo Calvino, "Lightness," *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p.10.)
[4] "Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times – noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring – belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars." (Italo Calvino, "Lightness," *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p.12.)

first cues to slacken the serious modernist attitude communicated in my earlier work. Lightness, whether it translates into a humorous painting or allowing oneself to work openly with the products of one's culture, seemed to me not only a method of escaping the modernism's rigidity, but a necessary attitude in today's world.

In the spring of 2010, I made three large paintings on six-by-six-foot canvases, on which I painted quick, invented portraits in taped-off rectangles (figures 6 and 7). The rectangles were placed somewhat randomly on the canvas, and each measured 12 by 16 inches. After one layer of portraits dried I would begin a new layer, allowing the new portraits to overlap the old layers. This blocked out some portraits completely, while others were fragmented. I started these paintings primarily as a means of exploring how multiple, 'independent' images, can combine to form new, hybrid images; lightness and stupidity, however, quickly became prominent notions for how I could understand these works.

The original intention in the first of these paintings was to not have any of the portraits revealed once the painting was completed – it would consist entirely of fragments of portraits that no longer read figuratively. As I built the painting up, however, I again felt I was in the clutches of a systematic strategy. It seemed riskier to leave the portraits revealed and some entirely intact: this would depict the process of the painting, the layering of images, while putting in abeyance my tendency to block out an obvious, undesired content.

As a result a lightness emitted from these paintings – from the deliberate countering of my strategy of obfuscation and from the stupid serenity of the faces that

stare out benignly, almost contentedly. It is as if the characters depicted deliberately foiled the paintings' strategy, but only in order to show themselves complacently to the viewer. The implied grids prevent the paintings from becoming too silly or frivolous, while the contents of the rectangles tune the grids to an off-note; finally it is the grid that hides and only emerges softly from behind the aggressive frontality of the portraits. Many people have made comparisons between the *Face Matrix* paintings and social networking websites or the internet generally, comparisons that evoke lightness from another angle.[56]

The portraits in these paintings struck me as stupid in two ways: the faces are those of stupid characters (most have idiotic expressions, odd head structures, and unreceptive, glazed-over eyes) and, as combinations of intact marks and sketchy drawing, they act as traces of my innate 'signature' or 'hand.' Gustave Flaubert addresses the stupidity of the act of making a mark, the inscription, in letters sent while touring Northern Africa. In his writing about Flaubert's values, Jonathan Culler discusses a primary sight of the novelist's journey:

> What could be more stupid… than the 'bêtise sublime' of carving one's name in huge letters on Pompey's column? The name itself, 'Thompson,' is quite meaningless, yet it stares one imperiously in the face, looms before one as a surface which one does not know how to deal with. 'It can be read a quarter of a league away. There is no way to see the column without seeing the name 'Thompson' and consequently without thinking of Thompson.' There is in Flaubert's reactions a hint of jealousy: 'This idiot has become part of the monument and perpetuates himself with it,'

[5] "The second industrial revolution, unlike the first, does not present us with such crushing images as rolling mills and molten steel, but with 'bits' in a flow of information traveling along circuits in the form of electronic impulses. The iron machines still exist, but they obey the orders of weightless bits." (Italo Calvino, "Lightness," *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, p.8.)

[6] The lightness of Facebook, for example, comes in part from the blurring of factual or semi-factual information about a vast majority of individuals, presented at the users' discretion, with absurdity (beer pong photos, poor examples of wit, unbelievable honesty), also mostly presented at the users' discretion, all within the consolidated and rigid framework of the website.

> but it is due above all to his admiration for the profundity of this stupidity. 'Not only that, he overwhelms it by the magnificence of his gigantic letters.' These letters testify for him to the 'serenity' of stupidity, and he concludes that 'Stupidity is something unshakeable. Nothing attacks it without breaking itself against it. It is of the nature of granite, hard and resistant'(*Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, 176) (Quotations are from Flaubert's letters).

The gestural mark of a painter, the 'personal' trace of the artist's hand, is not unlike Thompson's parasitic inscription. The conditions in which the act occurs are different, but the will to be acknowledged or to present oneself to the world is the same. It isn't that I don't value individual style in historical paintings, even in some contemporary ones, but I cannot weigh the 'stylistic' gesture now without including its historical baggage. The unveiled mark, despite its quality, legitimizes itself through its referral to a vast history of precedents from Rembrandt to de Kooning; the painter rides on the back of painting's history/legacy just as Thompson rides on Pompey's back.

What the *Face Matrix* paintings convey is this remainder of personal gesture. My inclination is to always blot out the mark in my work, the determinative expression of *I am here*, which usually appears to me as a residue of image-making that implies a will to originality, thereby underscoring my own stupidity.[7] Making these paintings helped me to see what is really at stake – not so much the revealing of a personal stupidity, but a discourse of stupidity, a discourse that suggests that intelligence and stupidity are not mutually exclusive. As Flaubert asserts, there is an undeniable force in stupidity, a serenity and stasis that intelligence might very well envy.

[7] Albert Oehlen comments humorously yet poignantly on the relationship between stupidity and originality: "When I made *Glocken und Glöckchen*, 1990, the drawing of the man whose legs and arms were exchanged, I thought it so stupid that I could have sworn it existed at least twenty times somewhere else. It doesn't, because no one has dared to draw it because it is so stupid." (Albert Oehlen, *I Will Always Champion Good Painting/I Will Always Champion Bad Painting*, p.II.)

figure 6: *Face Matrix 1*, 2010

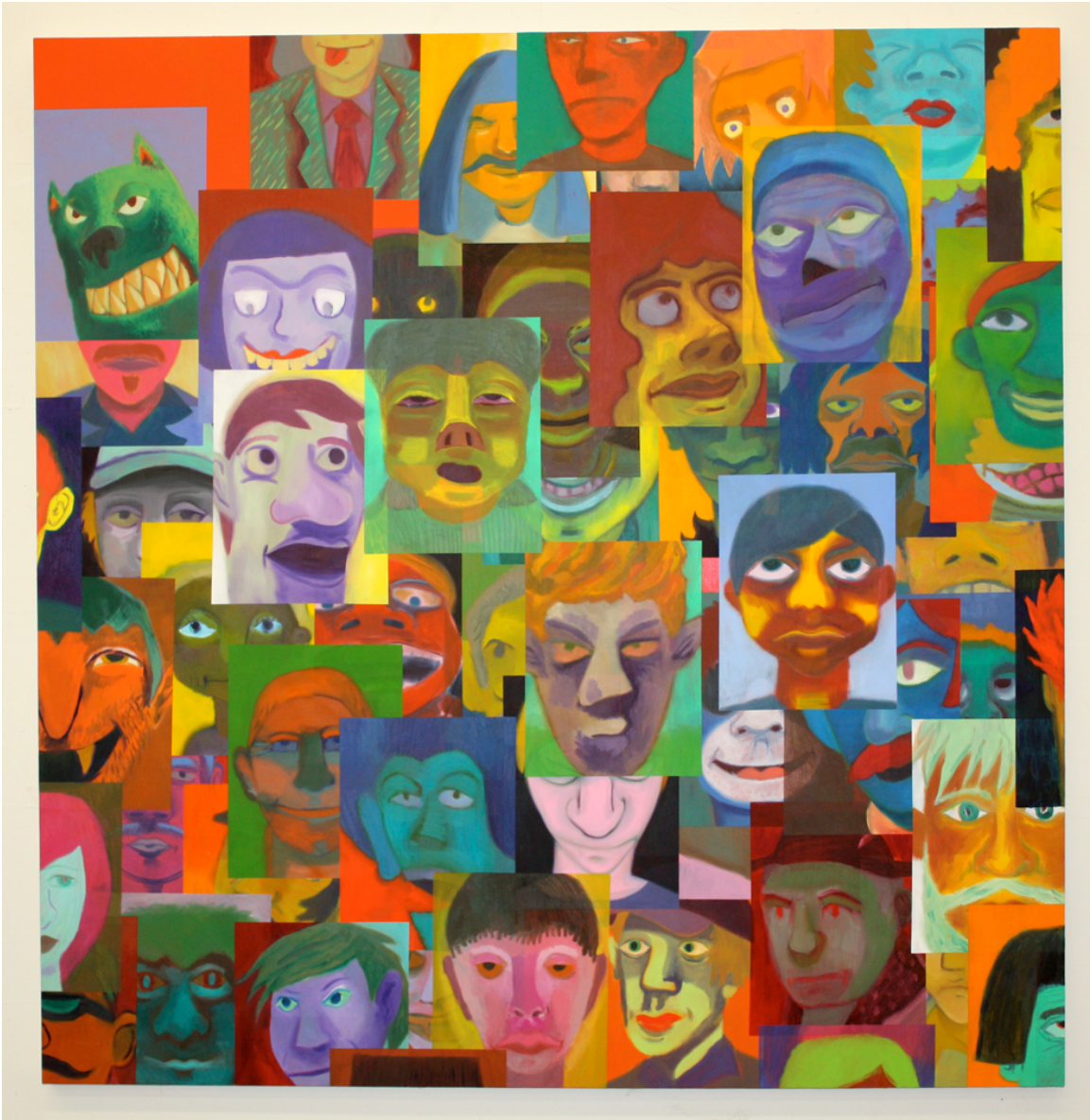

figure 7: *Face Matrix 2*, 2010

Constellations

The *Face Matrix* paintings suggest another project in my work: dispersal of meaning. Jacques Derrida points to both the textual supplement, which may be used to understand a text via what it lacks, and the *parergon*, or what lies between the work and not-the-work (a frame; the wall; captions; other text), as valuable to the reading of an art work; with these factors in mind, I cannot easily envision an autonomous art work, or an art work which solely embodies its own meanings[8]. Every art work has an aura of meaning around it which does not necessarily function in tandem with the work itself: the supplement and *parergon* compose, in part, this aura. My attention within an art work has therefore traveled *outwards*, towards the frame, the boundaries of the image, the side of the canvas, and the space between works. My work responds to the challenges of this notion in multiple forms; this section will describe the different ways I have come to understand different compositions of dispersed meaning.

The *Face Matrix* paintings, in their aggregation of individual images, represent one type of what I call *constellations*. Constellations are bodies of objects or images amongst which meaning or value disperses itself; it is not evident that they should be considered either single art works or bodies of art works. There is no consistent signifier that a group of objects or images could be considered a constellation; rather, the viewer must make such a judgment based on how he or she extracts meaning from them. The compositions of the *Face Matrix* paintings are fixed, and the relationships between the

[8] Roland Barthes speaks of the difficulty of withholding meaning, of the fact that meaning is inherent in things *by nature*; he has proved to be an important component of my understanding of the coexistence of multiple meanings within a work: "To suspend meaning is an extremely difficult task requiring at the same time a very great technique and total intellectual loyalty. That means getting rid of all parasite meanings, which is extremely difficult." (Roland Barthes, "On Film," *The Grain of the Voice*, p.21.)

images within a single work constant; yet in many ways the crux of these works lies in the coexistence of rigidly defined separate images on a single painted surface. I have experimented elsewhere with smaller images that make up larger ones, such as the paintings *Wall* and *Limbo* (figures 8 and 9). I originally came to think of constellations, however, as compositions of multiple objects within a given space.

I began a series of objects (paintings, photos, scanned images, framed objects) based on the still life – piles of flattened and stacked materials in my studio, a kind of dimensional compressed form of visual interference – in which each consecutive piece was derived from some image in the previous work (figures 10 and 11). The series began from a desire to fix these 'found' compositions into an image, but slowly grew into a language about drifting and fugitive images. The transitory properties that define and delimit an image, the genealogy of the images, began to emerge as the content of the group. The original values of the source images receded, amplifying the means by which they resurfaced and transformed in various incarnations. The value of the series, then, distributed itself among the individual pieces as components of a larger gesture with no fixed form.

Transitive Painting

Transitive painting, rather than dispersing meaning amongst multiple objects as in a constellation, places the painting-object at the intersection of systems of knowledge, exchange, etc. Objects functioning within this paradigm call attention to the networks of which they claim to be a part, apparently becoming a new point at which the systems' meanings are doled out, or simply acting as a marker or sign pointing outward to the networks. David Joselit, who coined the term, states that transitive painting takes many forms, but the impetus it satisfies is marked when he writes, "[c]ertainly, painting has always belonged to networks of distribution and exhibition, but Kippenberger claims something more: that, by the early 1990s, an individual painter should explicitly *visualize* such networks" ("Painting Beside Itself," 125). He cites the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of transitive – "expressing an action which passes over to an object" – again affirming that the art works he discusses operate as passageways rather than endpoints (128).

Joselit highlights Cheyney Thompson in a different essay as an artist whose work thrives on varied associations and arcane sources. Thompson's work exists as a realization of so many choices derived from specific, obscure trails of knowledge, choices whose material formulations do not admit any apparent relation to one another. For example, his *Chromochrome* and *Chronochrome* series, closely related, conflate historical art material tropes (the pattern of a woven linen surface; standardized canvas shape and size formats), an archaic and highly dubious three-dimensional color scale, a tonal scale based on the time of day that the artist is painting, and the 18th century French

villain archetype of Robert Macaire. Whether or not Thompson hopes his viewers to see all of these strands of information in his work is unclear; what is important to me, though, is that his works emanate specificity as a result of these highly specified choices.

My gravitation toward transitive painting was natural, if coincidental; Thompson's work exemplifies the strangeness produced by isolated, encoded forms. His approach combines highly specified forms that read as specific, but do not speak of the specificity of any present or knowable thing[9]. My investigation of this work came from an interest in artists like Thompson, Wade Guyton, and Kelley Walker, all of whose work I understood as composed of intelligent, specified forms, the content of which was ultimately unclear to me. I have produced works that I would not call instances of transitive painting in the specific way that Joselit frames Thompson's work, but which intentionally riff on the works of some of the previously mentioned artists in hopes of garnering a sense of how their works arrive at their cryptic outcomes (figures 3 and 4).

Despite all this, I am suspicious of transitive painting as represented by Thompson's work: providing a reason for every decision, no matter how encoded it may be, seems like the product of art school criticism. According to this logic, a definitive statement about the origin of a form releases the artist from responsibility for the form, without further questioning *why* one would define each of one's choices, or evaluating the nature of those choices. For this reason, the systems around which works like *Familiar Pool (Plaisir)* operate are not explicitly revealed, either in the work or in

[9] Joselit concisely defines the nature of transitive painting via Thompson's work: "they are information *portals* as opposed to information *receptacles*" (David Joselit, "Blanks and Noise: On Cheyney Thompson," p.132.)

supplemental elements; the work consequently does not yield to Kippenburger's injunction, but is left to the viewer as a talisman, a symbol, of its own ambiguity.

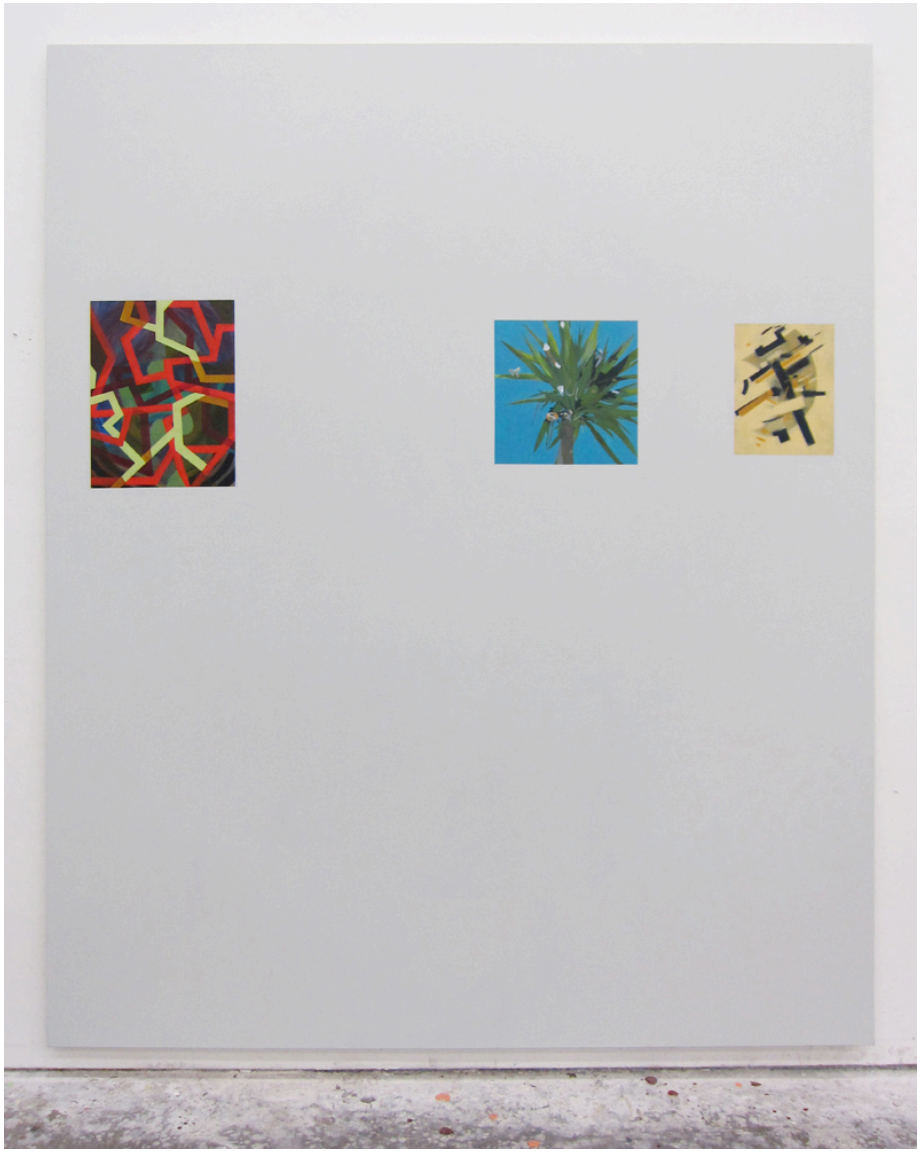

figure 8: *Wall*, 2009

figure 9: *Limbo*, 2011

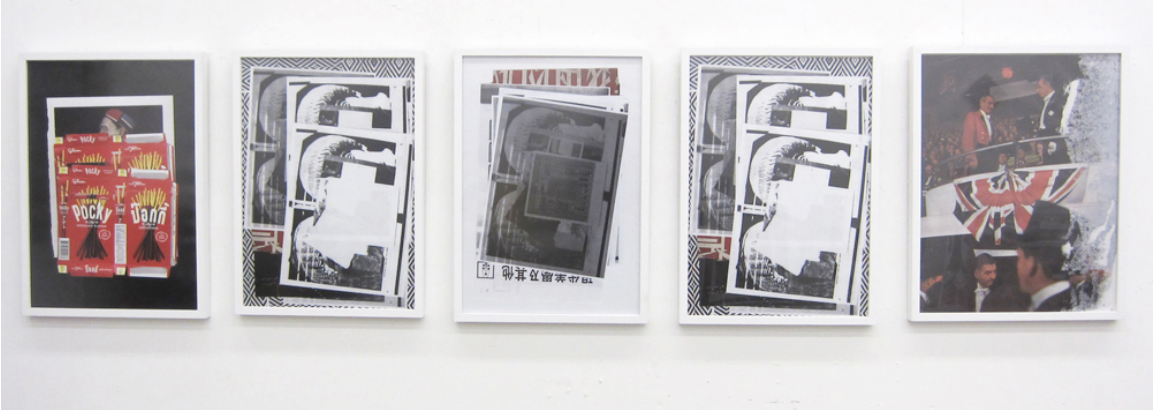

figure 10: *Drift*, 2010

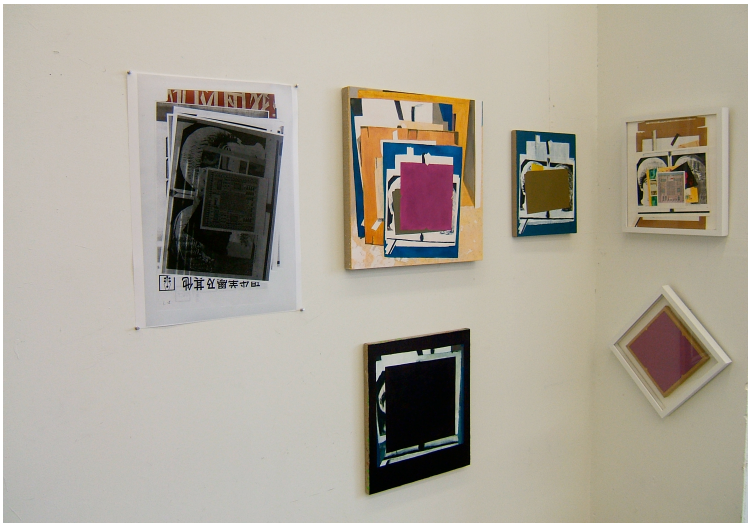

figure 11: constellation of works from the *Narcissus* series, 2009

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